

## **“Destabilized Perception”**

### **Infrastructural Aesthetics in the Films of Adam Curtis**

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**Abstract:** The formerly dissident status of the essay film has, in recent years, been exchanged for a great deal of favorable attention both inside and outside of academia. In the more overly moralistic commentary on the form, the contemporary essay film is submitted as a tactical response to a surfeit of audiovisual media, to an era in which most of us have become both consumers and producers of a digital deluge. The work of Adam Curtis is notably absent from these ongoing debates. Yet Curtis is far from an underground figure—he has been making essayistic films for the BBC for more than twenty years and was the first to produce work directly for the iPlayer platform. Using archival images to examine the present, his films produce counterintuitive connections and abrupt collisions that supplant the authority of narrative causality for a precarious network of associations and linkages. This article treats Curtis’s recent body of work diagnostically. It argues that, quite apart from any promise of escape or deliverance, the aesthetic form of his work actively inhabits the rhythms and vectors of contemporary media. For Curtis, the media-technological conditions of the twenty-first century provoke a crisis that is both political and epistemological, one in which sensemaking can no longer claim to take place at a distance from the infrastructure that mediates such processes but is instead thoroughly and inescapably immanent to them, a situation that prevents contact with the outside. His films are about what he calls “destabilized perception”, but importantly they are also a function of this condition, one that in turn demands a shift in how we conceive the essay film in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** aesthetics, Adam Curtis, essay film, infrastructure, symptomatology, populism

The hot ticket of the 2009 Manchester International Festival was a strange, immersive theater production staged across several floors of a derelict office building. After ascending in a cramped elevator, visitors would be left to explore an abundance of uncanny spaces staged to emulate scenes and evoke stories from mid-twentieth century American culture: an eerie abandoned film set, a meticulously manicured suburban home, an ominously decorated dressing room, a facsimile of a CIA office, and so on. Along the way, jump scare tricks, sound cues, and a scattering of performers would encourage visitors to scrutinize a range of media, including paranoid letters, portentous radio broadcasts, and mysteriously

redacted documents. Eventually, at the center of this haunted house, visitors would arrive at the screening of an essay film by Adam Curtis.

Composed of archive film from the 1950s and 1960s, together with clips from Hollywood cinema and accompanied by a soundtrack of American pop music, *It Felt like a Kiss* (2009) begins with a series of title cards. It announces that previously orienting stories, the stories underlying a liberal project that used to “make sense of the world,” have fallen apart, leaving nothing but “fragments” which haunt us in the present “like half-forgotten dreams.” Having traversed and investigated the staged remnants of these stories—these tableaux of the material and technological conditions within which sensemaking occurs and through which power is deployed—visitors to the show were prompted to reflect on how nightmarish the dreams of the twentieth century have become. It is the collapse of one into the other that provides the focus for Curtis’s entire body of work. He would later describe *It Felt like a Kiss* as an experiment in which he sought to convey this collapse both analytically and emotionally (Curtis 2012b), an aesthetic experiment in which the film itself, as a discrete object, renders infrastructural stories if not exactly visible then in some way sensorial.

Infrastructure may seem like an odd term to use to describe stories. Indeed, at a time when there is increasing unanimity about the objects and materials addressed by an emergent critical infrastructure studies—essentially “stuff you can kick” (Parks 2015)—employing the term in any other way necessarily invites a certain level of skepticism. Yet infrastructural forms are not limited to the pipelines, power grids, and highway systems ordinarily evoked by the term—infrastructure can be social and cultural, too. In fields like organization theory, for example, there is already a long-standing concern for how narrative, as well as storytelling, “directs action and interaction, in the same way in which

an infrastructure of roads and signs enables and constrains” (Deuten and Rip 2000: 71). Here *narrative infrastructure* is not just a metaphor—it describes the constitutive and material agency of stories, their powers of mediation and organization. Keller Easterling, an architectural and urban theorist, negotiates a path between these two positions by describing the relation between “object forms” and “active forms” (2014: 90). In her account, stories can be active forms, beyond the obvious content or message: they can be understood operationally in the way that they coordinate affective capacities, induce a certain “disposition” (72) and suppress or otherwise redirect social potential. Stories can, then, have a political force in the world by mediating our perception of it, which is to say that by sinking into the background, by operating as part of the “technological nonconscious” (Hayles 2006), stories can be world making. Such stories are not simply ideological, where agency is understood to be located with human authors who seek to deploy them like political tools, but instead comprise a background with its own agency, a background with which humans remain relationally entangled. It is only at moments of political transition, moments initially experienced as “infrastructural failure” or “glitch” (Berlant 2016: 393), that stories formerly operating in this background can be grasped more directly.

The media theorist McKenzie Wark describes the production of an infrastructural background in terms of successive processes of abstraction. In his account of the most recent stage, the geography and spaces of the built environment become overlaid by “an information landscape,” an abstract “regime of communication where information can travel faster than people or things” (2012: 34). These are infrastructural conditions that elude conventional modes of knowledge and perception, but they are also precarious conditions. Though stories still “exist in advance” (63), administering and mobilizing

factive experience, there is also a tendency toward more anomalous events—glitches where stories no longer function as they should and cannot be contained by familiar narratives. What is at stake here is the capacity to perceive complex procedures that shape our being-in and becoming-with the world, together with our understanding of this condition. This is politically important because such processes of mediation, although originary to the human (Kember and Zylinska 2012: 13–18), have in the digital era transformed and intensified, not least because the scales and speeds of communicational infrastructures are designed to be concealed, to blend in, to become naturalized. These abstract spaces may not be under the naively instrumental control of humans, but it is in such spaces where power relations are performed. Ultimately this means that it is now more important than ever to recognize stories as logistical and organizational rather than exclusively narrational—a form privileged by literary modernity. The algorithmic logic of digital computation, for example, reactivates a premodern, nonnarrative mode of telling (Young 2017: 126–28), but the consequences of this situation, its impact on our ability to “make sense of the world,” as Curtis puts it, demands new modes of perception.

In this article I claim that Curtis’s recent work, and particularly the films made since his experiment with *It Felt like a Kiss*, confronts the politics of infrastructure diagnostically, which is to say that these films provoke encounters with the active form, the operational logic of contemporary “stories” that is often distinct from or at odds with a narrative conveyed on the representational level. Following Easterling, this mode of sensemaking can be described in terms of “special aesthetic practices” (2014: 91), practices that I examine in the context of current debates about the essay film.

## Special Aesthetic Practices

Compared with the way that many film genres or modes tend toward classification, the essay film resists any straightforward capture. It is a practice of filmmaking best understood in terms of its sensibility, which inhabits a space somewhere between the more recognizable qualities of documentary, fiction, and experimental cinema, a space that has historically existed outside of the mainstream (Alter and Corrigan 2017: 5–6). In recent years though, this dissident status has been exchanged for a great deal of favorable attention: the essay film has been the subject of numerous festivals, conferences, books, and articles, both inside and outside of academia. There is, it is generally implied, something especially timely about this resurgence. It is reported that the essayistic form particularly appeals to digital natives, equipped as they are with a new visual literacy and technological capability (Sandhu 2013). The more overtly moralistic commentary on this relationship updates Jean-Luc Godard's assertion that the essay film is "a form that thinks" (quoted in Corrigan 2011: 33) and submits the essay film as a tactical response to a surfeit of audiovisual media, to an era in which most of us have become both consumers and producers of a digital deluge. Against the threat of this accelerating torrent of commercial and phatic culture, the essay film is deployed as a life raft, affirmed for its potential to help us make sense of the world, to help us "stay afloat" (Lee 2017).

By focusing on Curtis's recent work, notably absent from critical discussion of the form, I offer a different take on the contemporary essay film. In fact, Curtis is far from an underground figure: largely feted in the United Kingdom for his intelligent, politically engaged television work, he has won several British Academy of Film and Television awards. Beginning work for the BBC in the 1980s, Curtis started as a researcher for a magazine program he has since both dismissed as "trash television" and credited with instructing him in how to "tell stories about the workings of political power, in ways that

political journalists didn't understand" (Curtis 2012a). After moving on to produce and direct various factual programs for the BBC, Curtis sought to tell such stories by gradually taking on more complex topics and by exploring broader themes. He has subsequently been making essayistic films for more than twenty years, initially for conventional broadcast on the BBC, and more recently for the iPlayer streaming platform. However, due to numerous rights restrictions and, Curtis claims, the conservative attitude of many international broadcasters (Jeffries 2005), viewers beyond the United Kingdom are unlikely to encounter his work in either context. In the United States, for example, where he has also received significant attention, his films have instead been formally exhibited in gallery spaces, subject to special screenings, or feature regularly at a handful of festivals.<sup>1</sup> Even in the United Kingdom, restrictions over rights to music and archive material mean that his broadcast films are not readily accessible through official channels. Hence, given that bootleg copies of much of his recent work are widely available online, it is of course more likely that viewers in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere will first encounter his films via video-hosting platforms like YouTube or via torrent file sharing. As will become clear, these are altogether appropriate mediums of access.

The institutional context of his filmmaking is, however, not incidental. According to Curtis (2011), it is his unique access to the BBC's archives that allows him to "write with images," a process that Curtis (2015) says involves searching through cataloged film materials and misclassified materials and exploring what he calls "different kinds of recorded realities," such as those stored on "Comp" tapes, used for decades to automatically record satellite feeds regardless of what was being transmitted, together with the longer unedited rushes from which much shorter news reports were created. He also has an assistant who travels to BBC offices around the world in order to digitize "hundreds of

thousands of hours” of material (Curtis 2015). Back in London, Curtis watches this material on fast forward, until, he says, something catches his eye. In his account, the key to this technique of writing with images is his “pattern brain” (Curtis 2011) and “associative way of thinking” (quoted in Lethem 2016). What he writes are “stories”—which is typically how each film announces itself—alternative stories that aim to problematize those that have become dominant in mediating our perception of the present. Curtis is interested in how power is mediated by stories of freedom, individualism, and technological utopianism and how, in the wreckage of grand narratives, our capacity for resistance has suffered a similar collapse. Accordingly, his own stories revisit “fragments from the past to examine the present” (Curtis 2012a).

It is the aesthetic form of this examination that I reflect on here. Quite apart from any promise of escape or deliverance, it is my contention that Curtis’s work—and particularly the films that followed *It Felt like a Kiss*—actively inhabit the rhythms and vectors of contemporary media and, in doing so, express a state of “destabilized perception,” to adopt a term used by Curtis himself (*Oh Dearism II*, 2014). For Curtis, the media-technological conditions of the twenty-first century provoke a crisis that is both political and epistemological, one in which sensemaking can no longer claim to take place separate to the infrastructure that mediates such processes but is instead thoroughly and inescapably immanent to them, a situation that prevents contact with the outside. His films are about this crisis, but, importantly, they are a function of it, too.

It is the political basis of this function that differentiates Curtis’s aesthetic practice from others that might appear similar, such as “cognitive mapping” (Jameson 1992), an aesthetic mode epitomized by a tendency in late twentieth-century American cinema toward narratives of conspiracy and paranoia. Curtis’s essay films undoubtedly share some

paranoiac qualities, although such paranoia is, of course, hardly a recent phenomenon. John Farrell (2006: 3) has described how paranoia is reflected in a much longer established cultural preoccupation with human agency, variously expressed in historical literature, and even, in the case of Cervantes's *Don Quixote*—"the first great modern paranoid adventurer"—providing the background against which the form of the literary novel first emerged. As a major impulse in modern literature, anxieties about the human capacity to separate rational thought and accurate perception from persuasive fantasy and deceitful invention gradually became uncoupled from individual, psychological behavior and extended into a method of examining and representing Western society. Much of this concerned the social effects of media-technological changes, and it is with this in mind that Curtis (2012a) has spoken enthusiastically about John Dos Passos's 1938 *USA* trilogy, with its fragmentary "newsreel" and "camera eye" mode of storytelling, which attempted to capture how perception had become newly organized according to the rhythms of mass media.

For Fredric Jameson, this can become a political method—particularly under conditions of abstraction that we used to call postmodernism—for beginning to cognize a capitalist world system, "a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves" (1992: 2). Like the conspiracy dramas analyzed by Jameson, aspects of Curtis's film essays confront the limits of representation allegorically, particularly through the arrangement of archive material. However, more generally the films cannot be "read" in this manner precisely because they do not work as part of Jameson's "hermeneutic machine" (10). In Curtis's films, paranoia is more fully expressed in the form, rather than according to the principle of suspicion that undergirds methods of interpretation. In fact,



this aesthetic mode of knowledge extends beyond Jameson's ambition for a process that includes "the representation of its own media system within itself" (25), because here, where questions of agency extend beyond the human, it is no longer a matter of grasping the "deeper truth" of individual experience in its connection with this system (16) but is instead a matter of entering into affective encounters with a truth that is always already mediated.

It is in this sense that I am less interested in what Curtis's films might tell us about him as a practitioner (and why we should critique or celebrate his technique) than I am in the extent to which this work can be seen to provide what Gilles Deleuze called a "symptomatological picture" of the present (1998: xvii). This means that, instead of being symptoms of the filmmaker's own auteurism (as tends to be the focus of conventional writing on the essay film), the aesthetics and storytelling logic of Curtis's films diagnose the symptoms of a media environment from which his practice emerges, and from which any separation remains impossible. Curtis is an essayist of and for the "post-truth" era, an era of "infoglut" (Andrejevic 2013) in which simple narratives fail to convince, in which any story is treated with suspicion, and in which the weaponization of such conditions threatens to render all perception unstable.

Here I attend to the diagnostic function of Curtis's body of work in terms of its recurrent tendencies rather than on the basis of close analysis of individual films. This is important because since 2009 the series of films he has produced for broadcast and for the iPlayer can effectively be understood as a single, ongoing project, despite their apparently different subjects and concerns. Indeed, it was in 2009 that Curtis also established a publicly accessible blog, with the suitably McLuhanesque name "The Medium and the Message," that he used to gather the stories and to experiment with the video material that

would later feature in his films, some of it reused several times.<sup>2</sup> To isolate the symptoms of destabilized perception, I identify how the aesthetics of this project provide dispositional knowledge about a “network” infrastructure through the production of encounters with its material intensities. First, though, it is necessary to examine the essay film form in more detail and to clarify why Curtis’s work remains largely unacknowledged by this emergent field of study.

## **Two “Moments” of the Essay Film**

Despite collaborating with musicians, an experimental theater company, and a choreographer, Curtis (2005, 2017) thoroughly rejects the label of “artist” and instead persistently claims that his work is that of a journalist. This assertion—made while holding an apparently unique supradepartmental position at the BBC—has exposed him to increasingly pointed criticism, based primarily on the extent to which his practice seems to disregard the editorial values of the organization’s prestigious current affairs, documentary, and news output. Indeed, Curtis’s films attract a growing amount of criticism from commentators on both left and right and from either side of the so-called culture war. For some critics and bloggers, the fact that his films have been viewed positively on platforms favored by the alt-right, such as *Breitbart News* and *InfoWars* (Hudnall 2010; Finn 2015), adds to an increasing sense of unease concerning Curtis’s methods of filmmaking and regarding his political motives. Former admirers now caution against a case of “the emperor’s new clothes” (Hancox 2015) and characterize his technique as oversimplified “shtick” that draws its legitimacy from victimization (Heiser 2017). Conservative commentators, on the other hand, deride films that offer a “ludicrously one-sided account” inspired by “visions of ‘Amerika’ as the fount of all evil” and other “lurid, Michael Moore-ish notions” (Davis 2004).

Nonetheless, by emphasizing the form of Curtis's recent filmmaking, I wish to suggest that such criticism of his journalistic pretensions in fact reflects an emerging consensus on what characterizes the essay film. In making this claim, it is neither my intention to stage an investiture, whereby Curtis is retrospectively accepted into the canon, nor do I mean to defend him against his critics from either side of the political spectrum. After all, Curtis has resisted numerous attempts to draw association between his work and that of essay film grandees Jean-Luc Godard and Chris Marker (Curtis 2012a, 2012b). Instead, he describes his own filmmaking as "a sort of populism" (Curtis 2012a), one that is set against avant-garde elitism.

Over the past decade, the narrative logic of his filmmaking has become increasingly subjective and speculative, characteristics that are considered fundamental to the essay film form in so far as it is distinguished from documentary (Elsaesser 2017: 240). These qualities are particularly apparent in the counterhegemonic truths Curtis's work superficially presents to the viewer, truths that are never less than ambiguous. This is because, in comparison to earlier work, like *The Mayfair Set* (1999) and *The Century of the Self* (2002), where narrative is organized according to techniques relatively familiar to factual filmmaking, more recent work such as *Bitter Lake* (2015) and *Hypernormalisation* (2016) operate much more on the basis of association, apparently employing, as per Thomas Elsaesser's description of essay film practice, "a patchwork of separate motifs quilted together by way of contrast or even clash" (2017: 241). It is, however, in regard to that other characteristic of the essay film, its *reflexivity* (Alter 2018: 22; Elsaesser 2017: 242; Rascaroli 2009: 29–31), that Curtis's work produces an encounter with a broader critique of the essayistic form in the twenty-first century. This encounter occurs in the apparent disjunction between content and form, between political argument and aesthetic

operation. Indeed, insofar as these films express the abstract space that conditions their possibility—typically conceptualized in terms of a network—his method supports the claim that the essayistic form is now “a dominant form of narrative in times of post-Fordist globalization” (Steyerl 2017: 276).<sup>3</sup>

To make sense of this involves recognizing what, in Laura Rascaroli’s terms, we might call two “moments” of the essay film (2017: 2). The first, familiar, twentieth-century moment, saw essayistic modes of filmmaking emerge in response to the limitations of merely documenting, where it was assumed that the subject of the film—whatever it might be and no matter how complex—could be disassembled and represented to an observer directly (Richter 1940: 90). For avant-garde artist Hans Richter, often credited with initially conceiving the essayistic mode of filmmaking, such an approach mistook the world for machine. It therefore expressed the disciplinary, assembly-line logic that dominated the industrial era. Problems arise, he pointed out, when such methods are applied to phenomena that resist neat disassembly, complex phenomena like ideas and stories that can neither be placed in front of a camera nor made comprehensible through the inspection of their various components. But from this crisis, new possibilities arise too: tasked with the job of “visualizing notions of the imaginary” (90), the filmmaker was forced to explore escape routes from dominant modes of expression, discourse, and representation. The first moment of the essay film is, then, an explicitly political moment, precisely because it was “constitutively against its time” (Rascaroli 2017: 5), a sensibility later endorsed by Theodor Adorno’s contention that in its “violations of the orthodoxy of thought” the essayistic form is fundamentally heretical and transgressive (1958: 81).

Insofar as it is set against the technocratic limitations of documentary rationality, Curtis’s essayistic populism can be understood as a response to the ongoing crisis that

triggered the form's initial emergence. Though produced under the banner of a state broadcaster, his films often flaunt their epistemological distinction from more legitimate, accredited ways of knowing, thus demonstrating the inherent instability of any binary between "official" and "popular" knowledge (Birchall 2006: 18). Indeed, for Benjamin Moffitt, a breakdown in the distinction between popular and official knowledge, prompted in the present by newly intense processes of mediation, provides the "stage" for a contemporary mode of populism that should be understood in terms of its style (Moffitt 2016: 31). Importantly, this style is not simply a function of political rhetoric or ideology, and it is "difficult to map on the traditional left-right divide" (45).

For some critics, it is precisely because they adhere to this populist style that Curtis's films are not to be trusted. Specifically, even though they espouse a liberal humanist perspective, these films play fast and loose with the qualities that are foundational to such a position: they lack objectivity, causal links are often dubious, and phenomena like dreams and strange coincidences often serve as evidence. Parodies of his work condemn the conspicuous use of pop music, clips from science fiction films, cartoonish sound effects, and numerous editing tricks, all of which are used to compensate for a discontinuous and incoherent narrative produced through abrupt collisions of subject matter, ideas, and material (Woodhams 2011; Applegate 2016). Though such criticism stems from concern about the extent to which Curtis violates documentary or journalistic orthodoxy, it is also borne out of a fear that he actively exploits the crisis outlined above and that his declarative statements about a "political and bureaucratic elite" (*The Trap*, 2007), delivered in either omniscient voiceover or sans serif type, are nothing more than a work of sophistry. In the words of one columnist, "In our post-truth times, it could be argued that Curtis himself is just another master manipulator. His array of jump cuts and abrupt narrative jack-knives

arouse the suspicion that perhaps he's simply the ultimate post-modernist; piecing together a diverting collage out of various picaresque shards of recent history and presenting it as the truth" (Harrison 2016). In short, Curtis is condemned for cynically capitalizing on conditions of attentional overload and "communicative abundance" (Moffitt 2016: 3), rather than surmounting such conditions.

It is, however, for this reason that Curtis's work should be understood in the context of a second moment of the essay film, a current and perhaps less familiar moment in which, as Hito Steyerl suggests, the essayistic form is symptomatic of the organization of postindustrial information economies, characterized by "the compulsory manufacturing of difference" (2017: 277), "extreme flexibilization, and distracted modes of attention" (276). Instead of the assembly line, this is an era of "control" (Deleuze 1992), an era of "semiocapitalism" (Berardi 2009) where surplus value is produced by fragmented and "creative" labor dependent on the logic of the network, a logic that permeates the whole of social life. For the media theorist Alexander Galloway (2014), this incursion also gives rise to a network fallacy, an erroneous reduction of everything to the network form. Evidence, he says, can be found in all sorts of realms. The gurus of social media see people as networks, literary theorists now read classic texts as networks, contemporary military strategists see the battlefield as a network, neuroscientists conceive the human brain as a network, contemporary philosophers understand ontology in terms of a network, and the list goes on and on: artists, architects, teachers, business leaders, "all have shifted prominently in recent years toward a network model" (Galloway 2014). For Galloway, this belief that "everything is a network" (Berry and Galloway 2016: 154) is akin to network fundamentalism, a dangerous limitation to our modes of thought with profound political consequences: the imagination of alternatives—all difference and otherness—is foreclosed,

already integrated and normalized within the network (157). In short, we find ourselves trapped in a state of what Galloway calls “network pessimism”: if everything is a network then it is not possible to think “in, through, or beyond networks, except in terms of networks themselves” (157).

Curtis’s films confront and inhabit this aporia. He is, first, highly critical of thinking the world in terms of networks, particularly in regard to his assessment of the organizational practices of the left. According to the contrarian counterhistories depicted in his films, the worst excesses of the neoliberal present are due to a weakness of the left, a weakness that is neither simply the result of repressive state power nor the marketization of party politics but also comes from within. Since the three-part *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011), this has been framed as a denunciation of the horizontal network. His position can, to a large extent, be characterized as a critique of what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams have called “folk politics” (2015: 10), understood as the dominant political sensibility of the contemporary left which, they argue, is “out of joint with the actual mechanisms of power.” In terms that are remarkably similar to Curtis’s narration, Srnicek and Williams argue that the complex conditions of the present “outpace the narratives we use to structure and make sense of our lives” (13). In their account, the left’s “guiding intuition” toward spontaneous, temporary, and reactive practices draws on an organizational toolkit of protests, strikes, and occupations devised in response to specific historical conditions, conditions that are no longer recognizable. Jodi Dean (2016: 4) similarly criticizes the extent to which such practices tend toward a “celebration of autonomous individuality,” even as they affirm the power of connection. It is in this context that Curtis emphasizes the disappointments of large scale anti-war protests, and, in *Hypernormalisation*, the antiglobalization and Occupy movements in particular. His work

of the past decade has consistently reprimanded the privileging of political practices that remain rooted in a neoliberal subjectivity, where the universal is seen as “intrinsically totalitarian” (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 11), thus obviating the kind of counterhegemonic project he believes is necessary to achieve structural and systemic change. For Curtis, the gains of horizontalism are fundamentally limited by a lack of political idealism, by a lack of orientation toward the future and the confidence this inspires. When capitalism dominates the horizon of political thought and action, it seems like there is no choice but to “retreat into a dreamworld” (*Hypernormalisation*, 2016).

For his critics, this position dangerously dismisses any politics of difference in favor of a regressive liberal humanist subject, one that is based on normative assumptions, obscures contingent power relations, and results in simplistic censure of certain groups—women in particular (Heiser 2017). Underlying this is Curtis’s tendency toward sweeping generalization, and his apparent longing for a narrative of future-oriented progress that is in fact inseparable from modern capitalism. Indeed, it is due to the absence of an equivalent narrative in contemporary “leftist” politics that he rejects such a label and in interviews has instead expressed provocative sympathy for the confidence-inspiring narratives of neo-conservatism and libertarianism, even if his films ultimately chart the ruinous consequences of such stories (Curtis 2012a, 2012b). Hence, quite apart from their radical sensibility, Curtis’s films have been condemned as articles of bad faith and as the epitome of collusion (Bond 2013).

Significantly, though, this criticism is also based on the fact that his films have increasingly taken on the form of networks. They often begin by establishing story as a set of nodal points. *Bitter Lake* begins by pinpointing particular locations and dates—Helmand Province, 1953; Wall Street, 1993; The Planet Solaris, 1972; and so on—important, it is



implied, in their specificity and connection. *It Felt like a Kiss* begins with a roll call of its key players—Saddam Hussein, Doris Day, and Enos the Chimp, among others—with the promise that previously unseen connections will be mapped between these disparate individuals. It is for this reason that his critics accuse him of perpetuating a “conspiratorial” explanation of social inertia and personal disempowerment, where patterns and associations purport to reveal otherwise hidden truths (Bond 2013; Hancox 2015; Heiser 2017). There is, it is suggested, something dangerous about his outsider’s perspective, in that it seeks to flatter the viewer and, in doing so, to act as gateway drug to a more irrational and paranoid mode of perception.

It is though my contention that Curtis’s populist aesthetic is entirely appropriate to the politics of the present, not because these films offer an intervention in the form of an alternative narrative but, rather, because they engage reflexively with the infrastructural conditions that mediate any story told about this present. In doing so, they grapple with the fact that today’s epistemological orthodoxy unsettles rather nostalgic ideas surrounding the heretical powers of the essay film. As Steyerl puts it, “Essays . . . are no longer the exotic ‘other’ of a drab and repetitive social reality. They now look amazingly similar to the collaged daily schedule of any contemporary working mom, to a zapping spree with a voiceover, or maybe just to a Sunday afternoon remix contest on YouTube” (2017: 277–78). In the twenty-first century, speculative truths and associational forms are simply expressions of a network imaginary that has become infrastructurally naturalized. Curtis’s films operate in a world already subject to endless estrangement, a culture no longer susceptible to aesthetic practices of disruption, alienation, and defamiliarization. One of the important consequences of this shift is that it becomes necessary to alter the basis for analyzing such a cultural work—rather than privileging its apparent status as an “agent of

change” (Birchall 2006: 26), we should instead consider how its mode of sensemaking functions diagnostically and how in conditions of network pessimism this mode of sensemaking might take a form previously deemed irrational (60). Aesthetic practices like these may in fact offer no attempt to alleviate the symptoms of crisis, but in the exhibition and amplification of infrastructural conditions, we are made aware of how stories are mediated, even as our reality continues to be constructed by their active forms, a situation that should at the very least problematize our tendency to presuppose their political value. The remainder of this article examines this idea in detail.

### **Destabilized Perception**

In her recent theorization of the essay film’s heretical and resistant power of thought, Rascaroli emphasizes the creation of “in-between spaces,” produced through “dialectical” disjunction (2017: 8). Leaning on Deleuze’s dialectic of difference, developed in his film philosophy, she argues that techniques of juxtaposition open up gaps and interstices through which images become “radically external to each other” (10). Essayistic interstices disrupt the otherwise indiscernible flow of filmic time and draw attention to the medium’s own construction. For Rascaroli, these spaces of possibility enable connections with the outside, with the virtual, with the new, and so for works associated with what I am here calling the “first moment” of the essay film, connection through disjunction is central to the functioning of the form. Of course the Deleuzian outside—affirmed through such connection—is not a transcendent position from which difference becomes subject to homogenization but is instead an immanent outside, a position of middle-ness-in-itself from which difference is preserved and produced. Yet under conditions of network pessimism, the very status of the outside is subject to another kind of enclosure.

Though the network era is superficially characterized as a time of continuous flux and flow, with connection stimulating change and possibility, the philosopher Frédéric Neyrat argues that the twenty-first century should in fact be recognized as a moment of “absolute flux,” one in which the “flux of information, capital, and affects” generates a strange continuity, experienced as a feeling of constant travel without movement (2018: 3). It is in this context that Galloway, for example, warns against a certain reading of Deleuze that is all too easily co-opted by a neoliberal brand of affirmationist thinking familiar to techno-utopianism. A fervent rejection of transcendence and concomitant celebration of connection, decentralization, and difference is, after all, the lingua franca of Silicon Valley and ventriloquized in the TED Talk. For Neyrat, a state of absolute flux “corresponds to a certain ontological regime, that of saturated immanence, in which everything remains perpetually inside, without any hope of an exit” (4). We should, then, pay more attention to the Deleuze, who, in describing emergent societies of control, understood that the instrumentalization of immanence prompts the necessity to “look for new weapons” (1992: 6) rather than cleave to those honed in battle against a transcendent absolute.

It is the malfunctioning of particular aesthetic weapons that triggers the mode of reflexivity exemplified in Curtis’s films, a mode of destabilized perception. This distinction from the more industrial infrastructural circumstances that gave rise to the first moment of the essay film is bound up with a broader shift in the present, one in which mediated perception is already “instinctively reflexive” (Citton 2017: 164), one in which “media tends to theorizes itself” (Rombes 2009: 6). According to Nicholas Rombes, this is a symptom of digital culture, where, quite apart from the promise of “hyper-clarified reality” (1), which extends from presumptions around increasing transparency (measured in line with the amount of information available) and increasing perfection (which imagines a

lossless, more detailed encounter with the world), there is in fact a tendency for digital media to highlight its own construction, imperfection, and obscurity. Crucially, Rombes argues that media in the digital age no longer lay bare the device as an act of transgression against dominant conventions, codes, or rules, nor is this reflexivity a simple matter of self-knowing irony. Instead, there is a growing tendency in contemporary television, cinema and videogames toward a “built-in mode of deconstruction” (62). Curtis’s films share formal features with “hyperlink cinema” (Quart 2005), “puzzle films” (Buckland 2009), “complex TV” (Mittell 2015), and narratives of epistemological reversal (Galloway 2006: 94), all of which pose serious questions about the ontology of media infrastructures.

Such media operate after the stability afforded by Aristotelian narrative form, and the viewing subject it presumes, has given way. It was of course possible to perceive this classical form in its entirety precisely because of a stability—no matter how artificial or deceptive—derived from causality, linearity, and finitude, qualities that maintained and circumscribed narrative structure (Franklin 2015: 150). Curtis’s films explore the impossibility of this totalizing perspective, the impossibility of encountering a story from a point of separation, and they experiment with a mode of sensemaking appropriate to such conditions. He describes such a practice as attempting to convey “what it feels like to live through history as an experience rather than a grand story” (Curtis 2010). His films map a multiplicity of connections, but he denies “positing a direct causal relationship” and instead insists that such relations function aesthetically and affectively: “I’m trying to actually do an emotionally coherent film as much as an intellectually coherent film because actually I think that increasingly a lot of people think like that” (Curtis 2011).<sup>4</sup> It seems clear that this sensibility is transmitted not by reasserting stability, not through a violation of the orthodoxy but by further unsettling any stability and thus intensifying the orthodoxy to the

point where the procedural arrangement of what he calls “a terrible, terrible prison” becomes affectively intelligible (Curtis 2012a). In Curtis’s own terms, we can describe this as an infrastructural aesthetic of “destabilized perception,” an idea explored throughout his work but expressed in these precise terms in the short film *Oh Dearism II*, broadcast on the BBC as part of an episode of Charlie Brooker’s satirical *Screenwipe*, and revisited in *Hypernormalisation*.

Curtis attributes the term destabilized perception to the political technologist Vladislav Surkov, a senior and altogether Machiavellian adviser to Vladimir Putin. In accounts of contemporary Russian politics much is made of Surkov’s former stint as a theater director, his love of conceptual art, countercultural poetry, and gangsta rap, and of the rock lyrics, science fiction stories, and satirical novel that he has written (Pomerantsev 2015: 81–87, 278). Surkov is held responsible for a new aestheticization of politics, for reworking avant-garde technique into a populist style that underlies “directed democracy” (Wilson 2005: 50). It is often implied that the key to this can be found in his own creative works.

*Almost Zero*, for example, a novel credited to “Natan Dubovitsky” but widely believed to have been written by Surkov, was originally published as a special 2009 edition of the literary magazine *Russian Pioneer*. It is undoubtedly tempting to scour the recent unauthorized English translation for clues as to his political maneuvering (Surkov 2017). After all, the novel—a postmodern crime story set in a violent world of publishing and public relations—includes descriptions of false identities, fake news, and performative debates where everyone involved has been manipulated, knowingly or unknowingly, to adopt a certain position within a managed system. This all resonates with Surkov’s early political career at the Kremlin, when he channeled funds both to nongovernmental

organizations and to the nationalist groups that opposed them, supported provocative arts festivals and the fundamentalist religious groups that condemned such work, and encouraged all sorts of independent movements while at the same time ensuring that their emergence was preemptively integrated into a system of false opposition, where oppositions are multiplied to the point where the basis for that opposition is obscured (Pomerantsev 2015: 78–79).

Accordingly, when it was revealed, a few months after the initial publication of *Almost Zero*, that “Natan Dubovitsky” was in fact a pseudonymous riff on Surkov’s wife’s maiden name, some commentators were quick to assume that by drawing attention to himself he had “given the game away” (Stott 2009), divulging the secrets of his dark political arts. For Curtis, though, it is more important to recognize how the disclosure itself functions as part of Surkov’s political operations, as a way of drawing attention to techniques of manipulation and, in doing so, destabilizing the ground upon which political activity might take place. In his coy denials of authorship, and in his own wildly contradictory reviews of the book (Pomerantsev 2015: 82), Surkov actively encourages unresolvable speculation about his association with the novel, speculation that remains beholden to the same management of difference described in its pages. It is the debilitating effect of such techniques that Curtis detects in the politics of the United States and United Kingdom, a situation he describes, in *Hypernormalisation*, as a “constant vaudeville of contradictory stories that makes it impossible for any real opposition to emerge because they can’t counter it with a coherent narrative of their own.”

Needless to say, Curtis is not the only one to fear such influence. In Special Council Robert Mueller’s investigation into attempts to manipulate the 2016 US presidential election, the Saint Petersburg–based Internet Research Agency is accused of operating with

the explicit aim of “spread[ing] distrust towards the candidates and the political system in general” (United States Department of Justice 2018: 6). Mueller’s indictment refers to a series of Surkovian techniques, including the use of political advertising on social media platforms and the stage management of political rallies. The latter, for example, allegedly involved the organization of several events in November 2016: rallies that both supported president-elect Trump and protested against the legitimacy of his victory (23). In such circumstances, singular stories are beset with an inherent volatility, a precariousness that renders them fallible to collapse. Our encounter with the world is destabilized by design. This, Curtis says, is “the strange mood of our time” (*Oh Dearism II*, 2014). Yet in spite of any apparent attempt to offer transcendent perspective on this time, his films actually and necessarily remain immanent to the network through which its mood is mediated. This is because contradictory stories are not just the work of political demiurges but are, more important, an expression of the operational procedures and distributed agencies with which we are obliged to engage when encountering such stories.

As Curtis deploys it, then, destabilized perception is an aesthetic mode that confronts and explores the network problematic without resolving it. In recent studies of similar “network aesthetics,” this involves “opting in completely” (Jagoda 2016: 225) and abandoning any attempts to escape such infrastructure. For Patrick Jagoda, it is, however, also a process that involves “slowing down and learning to inhabit a compromised environment” (225). His proposal is more pragmatic than affirmative, but it still seeks to utilize the power of in-between spaces. It involves being attentive to the “ordinary situations” (5) of the network, its banalities, its boredom, its humanness; it is only through such “thoughtful reflection” (228) that we might defend against the velocity of digital culture, its incessant speeding up of all things. Such exercises in restabilization are

motivated by a certain asceticism, they mourn the debilitation of attentional capacity and the loss of deep attention associated with a literary mode of sensemaking. Attending to ordinary situations is therefore a cognitive, intellectual process, where aesthetic practitioners can act as “auxiliary nurses for our attention” (Citton 2017: 156), by administering restorative and resistant temporalities through an arrangement of material that disjunctively contests the flux.

There are many such ordinary situations in Curtis’s recent films: politicians are caught daydreaming, a soldier pets a bird on the battlefield, people of all kinds dance, together and alone. Often, though, these situations are piled on top of one another, part of a thick, compressed visual experience, one that is hardly nursing. Indeed, the form of his recent work operates against the assumption that contemplative reflection is the best response to a situation where the object of scarcity is attention. At its most extreme, such as in a sequence of *It Felt like a Kiss* set to Tina Turner’s “River Deep, Mountain High,” Curtis subjects the viewer to a frenetic, bewildering assault, cutting from image to image in only a fraction of a second. Here, all images, all situations, are commensurable: the singularity of each image subordinated to “an ontology of general equivalence thoroughly consistent with capitalism” (Neyrat 2018: 7). Here, inhabiting the network involves attention overload, it means drawing attention to attention, to attention as a collective phenomenon subject to organization and control.

Recent analysis of contemporary television storytelling identifies similar practices. Jason Mittell, for example, describes an “operational aesthetic” (2015: 42), where attention is elicited and stimulated less by questions surrounding how a story might unfold and more from an uncertainty over what formal steps will be required to connect the dots, to resolve a complex set of distributed story stands and accomplish a feat of “narrative pyrotechnics”



(43). In a typical Curtis narrative, this uncertainty is induced by the continual undercutting of expectation, exemplified by the repeated use of *but* in voice and onscreen text. *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* is replete with examples: “But then,” “But in fact,” “But at this very moment,” “But even as this was happening,” “But in reality,” “But this was a fantasy,” “But it was an illusion.” Regulated by a form that is simultaneously repetitive and volatile, the viewer is continually changing direction, responding to an update, following a new link. The difference here is that exaggerated linkage smothers the possibility of any pyrotechnics—Curtis’s patterns are precariously arranged and lack authority. The significance of particular dates is never entirely clear. Any rational connection between key players remains obscure. This is particularly true of his films made directly for the iPlayer platform, encouraging as it does pausing, rewinding, and otherwise analyzing labyrinthine arguments that, in the case of *Hypernormalisation*, run for almost three hours. Devoting closer attention to films that, as Curtis says, “deliberately . . . show the joins,” in fact emphasizes that “there’s no reason you can’t join any two pieces of film up” (quoted in Lethem 2016). In other words, there is no limit to the number of connections that can be made. This does not simply mean that narrative becomes open-ended. It means instead that narrative takes on an accumulative and interrupted form—proceeding, and halting, and proceeding, without resolution (Franklin 2015: 165; Young 2017: 127). More significant, it means that such interruption operates according to a strange logic of divergence without exclusion, disjunction without separation.

This is because his films often elide traditional principles of montage. Curtis selects material on the basis of its “sensibility” (Curtis 2012a) rather than according to how it might sustain attention or stabilize a rational argument—he is guided by the creation of “mood” (Curtis 2015). His juxtapositions preserve the intensity of images but frequently

elide any conflict. Individual juxtapositions do clash—such as when the aftermath of appalling moments of violence, accompanied by a pop music soundtrack, is butted up against a scene of comedic absurdity—but the sheer array of such clashes often tips over into something else: difference is not flattened out, in the form contradiction, nor is there a stabilizing move toward synthesis.<sup>5</sup> Instead, in Deleuzian terms, destabilized perception is expressed in the form of disjunctive synthesis, where the conflict that drives narrative exists as “a plurality of coexisting oppositions” (Deleuze 2004: 255). The form of Curtis’s films actively works against the conflation of difference into a harmonious single narrative.

For the early Deleuze, this disjunctive mode of synthesis is fundamentally affirmative. Instead of acting to limit or exclude—instead of acting negatively—it is generated by a process of disjunction that remains disjunctive, that does not reduce reality to the actual but remains open to the virtual (Deleuze 1990: 174). The various connections explored by these films—connections between computer engineering, economic policy, military strategy, countercultural movements, and genre fiction—introduce yet further difference, further variation, further potentials. Importantly, though, such connections function here as an ambivalent corrective to any latent belief in the power of disruption. Here, any encounter with the outside, in spite of apparent tension, is already subject to control, which is to say they are encounters with a banal outside, an outside rendered fake, one that is not antagonistic to the logic of contemporary power but corresponds to and intensifies its operation. In the prison of a society of control, disjunctive synthesis is revealed as one of the old weapons, one that can only reorient perception toward the functioning of the new media orthodoxy. The stories told in Curtis’s films do not inform us about the present, nor do the images he arranges lend themselves to interpretation. Instead,

these stories render aesthetically sensible what cannot be resolved hermeneutically—they demand that we encounter them literally, as infrastructure.

### **Infrastructural Aesthetics**

Curtis's body of work evidently fails the political test set by the cinematic form of the essayistic film: it does not violate the orthodoxy of its time. Nor, on the level of form, do his films identify new weapons, insofar as these might be understood in terms of new aesthetic practices for "cutting through the information clutter" (Andrejevic 2013: 4), new ways to manage and navigate the contemporary media environment in order to become stably and coherently informed. Indeed, in proliferating and multiplying potential accounts of reality, Curtis deploys techniques familiar to the politics of what Mark Andrejevic has called "the postmodern right" (6), where any specific narrative—dominant or oppositional—is subjected to a saturation effect that threatens to neutralize critique entirely. The logical organization of Curtis's films prompt conditions of uncertainty similar to those in which the outcome of elections, the status of a president's birth certificate, and the scientific evidence for global warming can all be thrown into doubt. It is, then, tempting to condemn this as a form of trolling, to understand his technique as the realization of an alt-right dream to "expose and heighten the contradictions within the system" (Hood 2015), a technique that at best maintains the status quo and at worst is dangerously nihilistic. I have, however, treated his work symptomatically, as a series of films that provoke aesthetic encounters with storytelling infrastructure, a media environment that functions largely invisibly even as it conditions entangled practices of knowing and being. What, then, is the final diagnosis? What are the implications of this portrait of symptoms?

First, Curtis's films experiment with a mode of sensemaking that is both appropriate and necessary to a moment of destabilized perception, a moment when the object of

study—the referent—cannot be grasped by conventional means of representation. This is a logic of sense triggered by the very fact that Curtis, an essayist of the digital whether he likes it or not, is incapable of presenting a singular story that can be apprehended as accurate, rational, or trustworthy. His films therefore make sense of the present as a moment of “impasse” (Berlant 2011: 4); they render sensible a state of network pessimism or what Lauren Berlant also characterizes as the “cruel optimism” of this present, where the affirmation of the essayistic form, aligned to a political project of connection through disjunction, is on the one hand what provides “temporary housing” (5) for survival at a time of infrastructural transition but is also, on the other hand, what impedes perception of the outside, namely, that which inspired the affirmation in the first place. Over and above the particular detail of the arguments he presents, Curtis’s reflexive engagement with the bottleneck of this impasse, this state of absolute flux, can be understood as a series of temporary filmic encounters with the conditions of control society, encounters that are not elicited by ascetic contemplation of ordinary moments but through an intense aesthetic expression of the ordinariness of the storytelling infrastructure itself. Let us say that such a practice contributes toward what might be described—somewhat speculatively—as an infrastructural aesthetics, a mode of essayistic filmmaking of and for the twenty-first century.

Second, an infrastructural aesthetics is bound up with stories that operate within abstract but delimited conditions of space and time and that govern communicational form. Such conditions cannot be reduced to that which is rendered knowable through attempts to reveal an “actually existing” infrastructure of cables and servers. The representation of such materials is clearly politically important, but there is also a limitation to what is revealed by such positive knowledge. This is a key issue in broader, ongoing debates concerning visual

culture. For example, much of the work produced by the late essayistic filmmaker Harun Farocki concerned what he would eventually come to call “operative images,” by which he meant “images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation” (2004: 17). His films explore imaging technologies and machine vision in the context of the military industrial (or, latterly, entertainment) complex and, by examining the materiality of image making, reveal how human visual perception is susceptible to mediation by nonhuman systems. Today, though, the critical efficacy of any distinction between operative images and representational images is diminished by the infrastructural conditions through which the vast majority of images circulate and are assimilated. It is for this reason that the artist Trevor Paglen (2016) alerts us to the uncoupling of “the visual” from human culture and, in its place, the rising dominance of an “invisible visual culture,” where machine-readable images fundamental to mechanisms of control remain inaccessible to humans. If we are to stand any chance of comprehending this new world, he warns, “we need to unlearn how to see like humans.” Yet in order to avoid simply recuperating this invisible visual culture in a form that is recognizable to “us,” any process of unlearning should begin modestly and aesthetically, not by illuminating and rationalizing human-nonhuman relations but by cultivating a sensibility to how, in an information landscape, all images are operative in their entanglement. Here, what becomes knowable is experienced only as an “arrested impression,” “an after-image on the sensorium” (Wark 2012: 54) of a space that otherwise remains abstract.

Third, then, an infrastructural aesthetics also demands that we recognize the sensemaking qualities of images beyond the limitations of linguistic sign and referent. This does not involve simply dismissing the transmission of meanings and messages as if these processes do not occur, but it does involve accepting that such processes are both

inseparable from and a consequence of the transmission of affects. So instead of conceiving of sensemaking as an exclusively human business, in which images are interpreted according to how they point to the “truth” of an external and already existent reality, addressing infrastructural aesthetics involves recognizing the way that audiovisual information is systematically arranged, exchanged, concentrated, and related—procedures through which any truth is mediated.

I have described this as a diagnostic process, but it can also be understood with reference to what Félix Guattari called “a-signifying” semiotics and its concern with “material intensities” (1984: 96). Like his frequent collaborator Gilles Deleuze, Guattari died just prior to the popular take-up of the internet and the associated development of a so-called network society, but his theory of a-signification was nonetheless developed in response to a prophetic vision of contemporary mediation, and particularly of its capitalist context. Power, Guattari insisted, increasingly operates in the nonsignifying, nonrepresentational realm. It is for this reason that—just as Hans Richter and the early pioneers of the essay film responded to the fact that the mechanisms of capitalism have no intrinsic meaning that can be submitted to representation—Curtis’s films respond to a situation in which making sense of the contemporary world is not primarily a question of narrative content but is instead a matter of the largely imperceptible processes through which such content is fragmented into packets of potential, distributed, and rendered equivalent. *It Felt like a Kiss* and the films that followed are constructed in such a way that these infrastructural conditions to storytelling and sensemaking are frequently foregrounded and intensified, the navigation of various connections felt, the rhythms and breaks of its continuous discontinuity experienced as a series of forces. This is a process of sensemaking that is “not beholden to significations and the individuated subjects who convey them”

(Langlois 2014: 80) but instead operates on the preindividual level and is mediated by the sets of relations upon which the films depend. In his viewing suite at the BBC, Curtis constructs stories from hundreds of terabytes of material that is subject to categorization, encoding, algorithmic procedures of retrieval, and the interface effects of nonlinear editing software. His “pattern brain” is not his own. It is on this basis that Guattari distinguishes between “human” significations and another kind of semiotics “which, regardless of the quantity of significations they convey, handle figures of expression that might be qualified as ‘non-human’” (quoted in Lazzarato 2014: 84). Curtis’s films destabilize perception by staging reflexive encounters between the a-signifying protocols of the network and the cultural assumptions surrounding storytelling. In short, an infrastructural aesthetics unravels long held assumptions about human sensemaking.

Fourth, it is important to reiterate that none of this amounts to a new political project. Intensifying the conditions of confinement does not provide a basis for resistance. Yet, following Guattari, this intensification can be said to affectively articulate the operation of a system, to “diagram” its political bearing (1984: 170). Although Curtis offers no call to action, at the end of *Bitter Lake* he does tell us that “there is something else out there, but we just don’t have the apparatus to see it. What is needed is a new story, and one that we can believe in.” His own response to this crisis suggests that, before it is possible to narrate such a story, it is first necessary to cultivate a sensibility toward how a system operates over time and, in so doing, gain dispositional awareness, an attunement to that system’s agency and latent potential. This may still be a kind of network pessimism, but in the language of recent debates in media studies, it is one that involves cultivating a “procedural literacy,” an infrastructural comprehension of control societies derived from an understanding that “any mode of expression follows particular protocols and that to fully

engage with that form, we must master its underlying procedures” (Mittell 2015: 54). We implicitly and explicitly engage in such processes when learning to play a video game, and—at least prior to the organizational dominance and absolute flux of platforms—when becoming adept at navigating the web. The functional form of Curtis’s essay films should be understood analogously: they activate a mode of affective knowledge, transmitting procedural literacy in their intensities, in the way that they feel.

Importantly, this is not a singular endeavor; it is a process of collective attunement, and Curtis is not the only contemporary essayistic practitioner whose films can be said to contribute to this heuristic endeavor. A survey of comparable work might include *The Sprawl* (2016), by the Dutch design collective Metahaven, which is similarly concerned with story as a fragmentary, contradictory, and unfinished form, particularly in the online version of the film, intended to be viewed as a multiplicity of video “shards” in an order determined by the YouTube algorithm. *The Sprawl* experimentally maps the tendency for internet-enabled perception to generate connections between otherwise unconnected events and, in doing so, “change the nature of reality itself.” Such a survey might also include recent work by Hito Steyerl, such as *How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File* (2013), a performative instruction manual for destabilizing human perception at a time of mass surveillance, based on her “defense of the poor image” (2009). Arranged as a series of “lessons,” Steyerl’s film presents ironic responses to a visual regime established on a hierarchy of resolution, where poor images—and the infrastructure that mediates them—might trigger alternative modes of perception. Examples of poor images include those produced by the restrictions of the so-called creative industries: if Curtis’s recent work for the BBC iPlayer is accessible to UK viewers in a way that other more revered essay films are not, the majority of his work still suffers a more common fate, surviving



elsewhere online in the form of unauthorized copies—and copies of copies—subject to compression, fragmentation, reformatting, reediting. And yet these poor images are also “popular images—images that can be made and seen by the many” (Steyerl 2009: 41), images that are about their “own real conditions of existence” (44). There is, in this sense, a particular realism to infrastructural aesthetics—an operational realism that is neither narrativel nor representational but is realist in what, after Galloway (2006: 84), might be described in terms of its affective congruence with the interactive experiences of both consumers and producers of digital images.

Finally, then, and in conclusion, the notion of an infrastructural aesthetics demands a closer examination of the contemporary, popular moment of the essay film itself. As the form begins to achieve a certain ubiquity in studies of media and culture, there is a contradictory tendency to champion the form’s rebellious qualities, its refusal to yield to direct categorization, while at the same time formalizing the essay film as an object of study by evaluating any contemporary work against that of a small canon of twentieth-century auteurs. It is not only cruel optimism but an inherent conservatism that permits the continued celebration of a supposedly nonconformist approach at the very moment that it expresses a new kind of conformism. In fact, it is only by attending to how the stories told in these films express their infrastructural conditions that studies of essayistic practice might offer a more significant diagnosis, a diagnosis that does not presume a capacity to heal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Examples include *Adam Curtis: The Desperate Edge of Now* (e-flux gallery New York, 2012), *Into the Zone: A Weekend with Adam Curtis* (Cinefamily, Los Angeles, 2017), and regular screenings at *True/False* festival (Columbia, Missouri, since 2005). *Massive Attack*

v *Adam Curtis*, a 2013 series of screenings and performances, was co-commissioned by Park Avenue Armory (New York City), Ruhrrennale (Duisberg, Germany), and Manchester International Festival (United Kingdom).

<sup>2</sup> Beginning in June 2009, Curtis regularly posted video material, together with commentary and argument, to [www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis](http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/adamcurtis). By 2014 his blogging activities had largely wound down, and at the time of this writing he only occasionally resurfaces on the platform to promote the release of new films. Nonetheless, the initial use of this blog was highly significant to the development of his films *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace* (2011) and *Bitter Lake* (2015).

<sup>3</sup> Steyerl originally poses this as a question.

<sup>4</sup> Aspects of *The Trap* (2007), particularly the opening sequence to episode 1, indicate that Curtis tested out the idea of “emotional coherence” prior to the more formal experiment of *It Felt like a Kiss*.

<sup>5</sup> Other images are of course employed more conventionally and simply provide illustrative support to the voiceover.

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## Filmography

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*How Not to Be Seen: A Fucking Didactic Educational .MOV File*. Directed by Hito Steyerl. HD Video, Single Screen. Commissioned by Venice Biennale. 2013.

*Hypernormalisation*. Written and edited by Adam Curtis. First available on BBC iPlayer, October 16, 2016.

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